New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1952

Volume XIII, Number 6 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of March 10, 1952

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1952 PRODUCTIONS

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

"Paris '90"

Daily Mirror

March 5, 1952

La Skinner Saucy, Satiric, Sophisticated in 'Paris '90'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

A loyal audience of Cornelia Otis Skinner fans braved rain, hail and high winds to reach the Booth Theatre last evening for the New York premiere of their favorite's new solo production, "Paris '90." It proved to be, by all odds, the most elaborate and ambitious of her series of one-woman shows.

This time, Miss Skinner is offering what amounts to three one-act playlets revolving about the aristocracy, artists and cocottes of the French capital shortly before the turn of the century. Act I has to do with a fashionable funeral, a calculating duchess, a celebrated fille de joie and an independent Englishwoman out to shock Paris with a bicycle and a balloon.

Act II is concerned with a statue of a saint that comes to life in a portal of Notre Dame. Through her eyes, you observe a laundress who caters to a frustrated Boston school teacher, a con woman and a professor's wife. The third presents some friends of the genius-dwarf, Toulouse-Lautrec, including Yvette Guilbert.

The Skinner moods range from the comic to the dramatic, from the saucy to the satiric. They are eminently sophisticated. Repression is absent most of the time, with gay cynicism and uninhibited hilarity predominating. The theme appears to be: "Woman's virtue is man's greatest invention." And Miss Skinner rings all the changes on that provocative idea.

Kay Swift has written a musical score, played engagingly by Nathaniel Shilkret's orchestra. Donald Oenslager and Helene Pons have designed atmospheric settings and costumes. Alden S. Blodget directed.

Miss Skinner has developed a large and smart following for her solo presentations. The aficionados fortunate enough to obtain tickets for the opening showed their appreciation of the artist's versatility and virtuosity via robust applause. It was evident that they enjoyed the evening immensely.

We feel it our duty to warn parents that "Paris '90" is not for children. It is for knowing adults only. Those inadvertently taking their "juniors" to the Booth may have to answer a lot of embarrassing questions. For the family trade we recommend that nice Mr. Williams, just down the street at the John Golden Theatre, with his magnificent readings from Charles Dickens.

This has been an unusual season in that much of our superior entertainment has been provided by solo shows and a dramatic foursome. The First Drama Quartet, Charles Laughton, Emlyn Williams and John Carradine already have delighted audiences hereabouts with their fascinating performances. And now Miss Skinner has been added to their number.

"PARIS '90"

Monodrama written and acted by Cornelia Otis Skinner; music and lyrics by Kay Swift; scenery by Donald Oenslager; costumes designed by Helene Pons; staged and presented by Alden S. Blodget at the Booth Theatre, March 4, 1952.

New York Post

March 5, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

Cornelia Otis Skinner in Paris

The art of Cornelia Otis Skinner is a highly specialized one, which doesn't appeal to all palates, but even those who are not enthusiastic about the theatrical form known as the monodrama must admit that she is a complete mistress of its intricacies. In her latest one-woman show, which she descriptively calls "Paris '90," Miss Skinner appears in 14 characterizations, and, although the sketches she has written for her roles vary in dramatic interest, there can be no doubt concerning the skill and variety that she brings to them.

The basis of "Paris '90," which she offered at the Booth Theater last night, is Miss Skinner's understanding admiration for the work of Toulouse-Lautrec, and five of the 15 sketches are founded on his celebrated subjects. But she doesn't confine herself to portraying the special friends of the great artist. She ranges through the France of his colorful period to offer portraits of other ladies of the epoch, most of them Parisiennes, but including in her survey a frustrated Boston schoolteacher and a very athletic Englishwoman.

Outside Help

Although the writing and the acting are a solo job, Miss Skinner has called on other talents to help her with a somewhat elaborate production. There are attractive settings by Donald Oenslager, colorful costumes by Helene Pons, and songs and lyrics by Kay Swift. This, I suspect, brings up a point. There is so much production that the stage seems set for something like an entire play, rather than a "monodrama," and I confess that there were times at the beginning of the evening when I thought she looked a little lonesome.

It made me, in addition, wonder about the perhaps technical matter of props. On occasion, she used real ones, but there were other times, as when she was presumably reading from Zola's historic "J'accuse," when she relied entirely on imagination. I bring up the matter merely to show that I was not a willing victim of Miss Skinner's art. It is possible, therefore, that it may be all the more a tribute to her for me to admit that, before the evening was half over, I was perfectly willing to accept all the conventions of her show.

Toulouse-Lautrec

It may have been this personal surrender that caused me to find the last section of Miss Skinner's performance the most interesting. I think, however, it was because it was in this part of the evening that she did her characterizations from Toulouse-Lautrec, and that these sketches were the ones that appealed most to her own imagination. Certainly her portrayal of Yvette Guilbert, in the final number on the program, showed Miss Skinner at her best in both acting and writing. She was also at her ablest as Deaf Bertha, the wistful prostitute, and as a violent German lion tamer.

In the earlier part of the evening I thought she was especially effective as the Boston school teacher, not only in her skillful use of the Boston accent but in her touching and sympathetic characterization of the prim and frustrated tourist. In large part the sketches are satirical, but in her portrayal of a Jewish mother, whose child had been a victim of the anti-Dreyfuss riots, she was again sympathetic and understanding. I must confess again that I am not the best audience conceivable for the monodrama, but there is no question about Miss Skinner's talent for it.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
March 5, 1952

'Paris '90'

By WALTER F. KERR

It is, I understand, the bane of Cornelia Otis Skinner's life that she is forever being introduced to kindly, white-haired old gentlemen who fondly profess to remember the first time they saw one of her monodramas, in the company of their mothers, at the age of six. I hope it will come as something of a comfort to Miss Skinner to know that at least one member of the older generation did not celebrate his third birthday party by being bundled off to see her perform.

In fact, I am in the curious position of having to admit that, until last night and the opening of "Paris '90,' I had never seen one of the actress' solo appearances at all. Coming freshly to the experience, I found Miss Skinner an engaging mime and her vignettes of life along the Champs-Elysees, the Left Bank and Montmartre agreeably diverting. The evening as a whole is rather long on atmosphere and local color, rather short on dramatic intensity. But it is full of richly varied character types, extraordinarily colorful in its mounting, and no doubt made to order for the star's devoted following.

* * *

Miss Skinner has, in this instance, surrounded herself with a full-scale production. Donald Oenslager has designed warm and affectionately detailed portals, poster-studded drop curtains, and delightfully fanciful cut-outs which pass for barouches, cathedral statuary, and the bistro backgrounds of Toulouse-Lautrec. These suggest the enchanting gas-lit world of last-century Paris with gaiety and charm, and the mood is rounded out by an admirably theatrical musical score provided by Kay Swift.

Against the evocative backgrounds Miss Skinner parades a world of music-hall artists, lion tamers from the circus, desiccated aristocrats, ladies of spurious virtue, washerwomen and English and American onlookers. At one point she even finds the appropriate cold and stony tones for a statue speaking from its niche atop Notre Dame. Again and again she brings a crayoned fragment to life. Sometimes, as in her impersonation of the can-can dancer Conchita, she captures the whole spirit of a life by so simple a device as kicking one shoe high into the air.

* * *

If there is a serious flaw in the program, it lies in Miss Skinner's determination to rough in an entire cross-section of the era she has fallen in love with. Because she is determined to get everything in, she must skimp on the individual portraits. As a result, there is little penetration into character, little insight into personality. The figures flash by, but they rarely pause long enough to solicit our intense concern.

Ironically, the monologist is at her best—in the earlier portions of the program at least—when she frees herself of the research she has done and has a fling at some visiting firemen. With a caricature of a robust English girl dimply sprinting on a tandem bicycle, she provokes the evening's heartiest laughs. And with a portrait of a respectable but rueful Boston school teacher she comes closest to being honestly moving.

Otherwise she is most effective in capturing the nervous, strident authority of a lion-tamer who has lashed her assistant to death; and again in an undeveloped but none the less striking bit dealing with a Jewess who is shocked to discover that her beloved Paris is capable of hatred.

"Paris '90" skims the surface of a gaudy era with considerable dash. If it isn't a brilliant evening, it remains an ingratiating one.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun
March 5, 1952

Cornelia Tours Paris Verbally

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Cornelia Otis Skinner premiered a new one-woman show last night, an entertainment of her own inspiration called "Paris '90." This set of monologues is like a nostalgic tour through a period and a place currently enjoying a wave of wide interest.

Miss Skinner has divided her program into three sections, each devoted to a district of Paris which represents high society, the bourgeois existence, or high life after dark.

In the opening sequence she concerns herself with people found in the Champs Elysee. They are all secure and assured, from cocotte to smug duchess. Their codes are strict and their morals all but nonexistent. They are aggressively aware of their own charms.

On the Left Bank.

The Left Bank chapter opens with Miss Skinner's most striking invention, a saint of stone high on a cathedral. This time it is a laundress who slightly ties the characters together, as we meet an unhappy schoolteacher, a slick practitioner of the confidence game and a Jewish woman shocked at the treatment her small son receives because of feeling over the Dreyfus case.

The final section in Montmartre is frankly based on subjects of the painter Toulouse-Lautrec. They include models for famous paintings of his, the Glutton, the Lion Tamer, Deaf Bertha and the famous Yvette Guilbert.

This has all been lushly produced, with exquisitely rich costumes by Helene Pons, in and out of which Miss Skinner skins (backstage) with lightning-like facility.

Shifting Background.

Donald Oenslager has provided the production with a fine poster-filled curtain and a variety of chic cut-outs, props and screens for shifting backgrounds. Kay Swift has devised a tinkling score which responds to the varying moods.

This whole undertaking is daring and sometimes overwhelming with sheer wealth of material. Miss Skinner clearly responds best to superhuman demands and she here behaves like a real champion.

The sum effect is of watching a series of stereopticon views as they begin surprisingly to breathe. Miss Skinner's talent is reproductional or reportorial rather than creative. Few of her monologues have much form, and the characters rarely change at all from beginning to end. The skits simply state that such a person existed, without commenting from any particular point of view about him.

The material is seldom very witty. I felt the sexy jokes were laughable largely because one was certain a perfect lady was purveying them.

'New Woman.'

If there is an integral fault in the show, it is a lack of brilliant variety in the performing. Since Miss Skinner is the first to confess that she flies apart with nerves on first nights, this may explain the surface sameness of her opening show. She has a trick of talking in little disconnected spurts of words, which cuts the flow of thought, and relates all her characters.

I like best her most authoritative impersonations. The "New Woman" is comical with militant feminism. And her Yvette Guilbert asserts herself with the superior glow of an artist who is unshakably arrived.

Journal American

March 5, 1952

Miss Skinner Shines As 14 Characters

By JOHN McCLAIN

To undertake a solo production in the legitimate theatre is a colossally ambitious business. How tragic or comical can one person be for two-and-a-half hours? How long can the average audience look at one face? And how restless can they get if you leave the stage to make changes?

It seemed to me that Cornelia Otis Skinner answered these and all the other questions last night at the Booth Theatre, where she appeared all alone in her new vehicle, "Paris '90."

In three full-length acts she portrayed 14 highly diverse characters, taking only a matter of seconds between scenes, and changing pace and mood to present an entire evening of extraordinary entertainment.

She became everything—a statue on the Cathedral of Notre Dame and a lady lion tamer; she ascended in a balloon, she caught a fish in the footlights and she wound up the proceedings wearing a prop nose.

She must have spoken as many lines as the entire cast of "Guys and Dolls" and worn almost as many costumes. For sheer strength and durability I would rate her up there with Bronko Nagurski, a football mastodon who delighted in running into rather than around the opposition.

* * *

Sustains Temper

The Paris Miss Skinner is concerned with is a gay and lusty metropolis, and she covers it from the elegance of the Champs Elysee to the fleshpots of Montmartre, with special emphasis on the familiar figures who have been immortalized in the posters of Toulouse-Lautrec.

There are naturally high and low spots in the proceedings, but she succeeds wonderfully well in building and sustaining the temper of the time.

To be specific, I thought she got off to a slow start with the first two numbers, but in a sense they set the mood for the hilarious "La Belle Conchita," an expensive Spanish adventuress, and "The New Woman," the athletic front end of a tandem bicycle.

In the second act I liked particularly the vignette of the statue in Notre Dame; "A Woman of Virtue," the 1890 version of the badger game, and "A Boston School Teacher," a sad saga of frustration.

The last act is all Toulouse-Lautrec and by far the most powerful scene in it concerns the German lady lion tamer who has killed her husband because he shot her pet lioness.

Additional credit should be handed Miss Skinner for the writing and research involved. The characters in each act are brought together by an ingenious device: a flower which passes between them, articles of clothing which are identified by a laundress, common friendship with Toulouse-Lautrec.

Maintains Illusion

Her dialogue is interspersed with enough French to maintain the illusion without becoming unintelligible to those who failed French II in school. Each scene has a satisfactory plot.

At this point the solo portion of the report must end because Miss Skinner is deeply indebted to two others who contributed solidly to her clambake: Kay Swift, who wrote most of the music and all the lyrics, and Donald Oenslager, who devised the sets.

Miss Swift's music is there all evening, sometimes as a distinct number sung by the principal, other times to serve as a bridge, and again as mood background. It struck me as being constantly appropriate and charming—I can even whistle parts of a song called "Calliope."

Oenslager created a series of small and highly operative settings of infinite charm, revealed whenever the curtain of period posters was lifted. They had to be highly operative to keep up with Miss Skinner's fast changes.

Which reminds me that mention should also be made of Helene Pons' costumes. Apart from her obvious taste and imagination she must have invented a zipper that never gets stuck.

DAILY NEWS

March 5, 1952

Skinner's 'Paris 1890' Charming

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Cornelia Otis Skinner's "Paris '90" may have a cast of only one, but it has 14 characters, most of whom are interesting and some of whom are downright exciting—and it has a fine and elaborate background of smart Donald Oenslager sets, striking Helene Pons costumes and tantalizing Kay Swift songs. Miss Skinner's one-woman show, which she offered last evening at the Booth Theatre, makes Emlyn Williams' one-man Dickens show look stark and simple.

At the moment you can't get me into an argument about which of these monologues is the more entertaining or the more artistic, because I went to the Booth last night as a Skinner fan and as an old roue, myself, from Paris, France. I was looking for a pleasant evening and I found it.

Three Views of Paris.

Miss Skinner has written—observantly, pithily and humorously—three sets of sketches about the Paris of the 1890s. The first concerns the high-toned people who frequent the Right Bank—women of fashion, duchesses, a high-priced woman of pleasure and, for ridiculous contrast, a bloomer-clad English tourist who regards herself as the New Woman. This New Woman has devoted herself to bicycling and to free-ballooning and is quite a funny character.

The second set of sketches is a sharper and more interesting collection about the Left Bank, starting off with observations about Parisian life by one who should know—a statue in a niche of the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Miss Skinner has tied all her numbers cleverly together so that one leads naturally to the next, and in this Left Bank series a laundress delivers a wool union suit to a Boston schoolma'am on her sabbatical, a petticoat to a professional playing the badger game and a Bar Mitzvah shirt for the son of a Jewish woman who fled hatred in Poland only to find more hatred in Paris on account of the Dreyfus case.

Toujours Lautrec.

The third and best set, concerning Montmartre, is titled "Friends of Toulouse-Lautrec." Here Miss Skinner has imagined playlets about some of the famed Lautrec paintings—La Goulue, the Lion Tamer, the prostitute known as Deaf Bertha and, for a finish, the famed Yvette Guilbert. Each of these sketches begins, of course, with Miss Skinner in the costume and pose of the painting. The dramatic high point of the evening is the lion tamer number.

Miss Skinner has set herself a really formidable task, but she breezes through it beautifully, changing voice, character and accent without seeming effort. And her costume changes are a miracle of fine design and expert planning. Oenslager's settings are graceful and gay and an excellent orchestra plays some quite fetching music by Miss Swift. "Paris '90" is, to me, a charming theatrical novelty.

The New York Times

March 5, 1952

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

In honor of "Paris '90," which opened at the Booth last evening, Cornelia Otis Skinner has created her most elaborate one-woman show. It begins with a vivid poster curtain made by Donald Oenslager out of French lithographs of the period; and it comes to life in the gay overture Kay Swift has composed.

Although one-woman shows are no doubt art and must therefore be respected, most of them look bleak and lonely. But the ornate costumes Helene Pons has designed and Mr. Oenslager's light-hearted scenery give "Paris '90" a warm, enchanting appearance. And Miss Swift's dry and mettlesome score, which has been ingeniously orchestrated by Russell Bennett, is a work of delight. Perhaps "inspiration" would be the better word. For Miss Swift has combined the period and a modern point of view in the music.

* * *

Miss Skinner is a decorative and quick-witted lady infatuated with a civilization that now seems ideal. In writing this nostalgic sketch-book she has studied the art, the lore and some of the history; and she represents some of the significant types in fourteen brief character portraits. There is a wet nurse, a laundress and a fabulous Spanish courtesan, and there are ladies of eminence and distinction. The costume changes are remarkable for both their speed and their contrast; and the material is clever and varied.

Although Miss Skinner is a vigorous and versatile actress, she remains pretty much on the surface of character. She is breezy on the outside, but she seldom looks inside her people. In the first two of the three acts there is one exception to the superficial manner. The school teacher from Boston has aroused Miss Skinner's sympathy. In both the writing and the acting this is a poignant sketch with a knowledge of what goes on in the heart of a desolate woman, and compassion for her fears and infirmities.

And in the third act, set in Montmartre, Miss Skinner again has something more than decoration to offer. For this is the section of her program that has come under the spell of Toulouse-Lautrec. She has designed, not only the costumes, but the attitudes to match some of his immortal lithographs. As an actress of prostitutes Miss Skinner, a born lady, is not very happy. Her devotion to sin is balically genteel.

But she has written the two scenes for Deaf Bertha and the one scene for Yvette Guilbert in a style that evokes the lost image of the wonderful little man who drew the people of Montmartre with modesty and respect. Although Deaf Bertha is a disillusioned prostituta, she recognizes in the artist who draws her a man of real humanity. And although Yvette Guilbert resents the ugliness of his portraiture she venerates the skill and honesty of his pictures.

* * *

Miss Skinner overdoes Yvette's art criticism. It is too long and too smugly prophetic. But something of Toulouse-Lautrec infiltrates this last third of the program and recovers some of the casual greatness of that independent spirit. Most of "Paris '90" is for the women's clubs who will doubtless enjoy it. They ought to be moved by the last two sections of the third act when Miss Skinner drops her party manners and recognizes an artist. Since this is a one-woman show, Toulouse-Lautrec does not appear on the stage. But he is the one vital character in the program.

"Women of Twilight"

DAILY NEWS

March 4, 1952

'Women of Twilight' Dreary Tale Of the Old Illegitimate Industry

By JOHN CHAPMAN

I am not particularly prejudiced against or in favor of unmarried mothers and unwed expectant mothers, but they seem to be a dull and dispiriting lot if the English drama, "Women of Twilight," is a sample of their society. This play, with an all-female cast, was presented last evening at the Plymouth by Joseph Kipness and Jack Hylton. Before the performance and during the first-act intermission there was a big parade of pickets outside, but they had been misdirected. They were picketing the scenery.

Sylvia Rayman's story is about a grubby London rooming-house which is a kind of baby farm and mother farm combined. Maternal parents and their offspring are lodged by an odious landlady who, when the death of an ill-nurtured infant occurs, would prefer to bury it in the garden in the middle of the night. Her grown clients are all sorts—a scarlet woman, a nice girl who didn't know what the consequences would be, the fiancée of a man who can't take time off from his job in America to make an honest boy of his son, the mistress of a murderer who gets hanged and sundry other cheery souls.

Pickets Were Fun.

The scenery was being picketed by a scenic artists' union because it had been imported, along with the cast, from England without proper tribute to the artists of our own theatre. It is a very good set designed by Mary Purvis—a gloomy room filled with cots, bassinettes, drying baby togs and dirty dishes. The pickets included three men with berets, one with a beret and a red shirt and one with earmuffs and no hat, so they must have been artists. They were more entertaining than the play.

It's a long play and it holds a lot. Last evening I figured I detected in it parts of Charles Dickens, "Way Down East," "The Little Foxes," "Payment Deferred," "The Two Orphans" and "Broken Blossoms." Yet all these elements were not enough to keep me interested. Among the ladies playing "Women of Twilight" are Mary Merrall as the proprietress of the house, Betty Ann Davies as an expectant widow who also is expecting a child, Lorraine Clewes as a slut and Miriam Karlin as a fille de joie whose career has been temporarily interrupted by nature.

"WOMEN OF TWILIGHT"

Play by Sylvia Rayman; staged by Anthony Hawtrey; setting by Mary Purvis; presented by Joseph Kipness and Jack Hylton at the Plymouth Theatre, March 3, 1952. The cast:

Helen Allistair...Mary Merrall
Christine...Gwendoline Watford
Jess.....Lorraine Clewes
Rosie.....June Whitfield
Laura.....Gwynne Whitby
Viviane.....Betty Ann Davies
Veronica.....Mary Matthews
Olga.....Miriam Karlin
Sal.....Lynda Lee
Molly.....Joan Forrest
Nurse.....Marjory Hawtrey

Daily Mirror

March 4, 1952

'Women of Twilight' Inept, Unsavory Offering

By ROBERT COLEMAN

A nasty English shocker called "Women of Twilight" slipped by the guards at Ellis Island and into the Plymouth Theatre last evening. It's an inept and unsavory little number, depending upon tawdry sensationalism rather than honesty and sincerity for its effect. And what effect it has, we suspect, is hardly what author Sylvia Rayman intended.

The dubious new arrival has to do with a dirty and disreputable home for unwed mothers near London, operated by a greedy and cunning old biddy. She not only cheats the mothers, but starves their babies to boot. And on the side she runs an infant adoption racket. But in the end she is exposed by one of her victims.

Now, this sort of thing goes on over here as well as in England. The subject is calculated to stir the emotions and arouse indignation, if handled with skill and integrity. But Miss Rayman has treated it in terms of farce and unabashed melodrama. The result is an ineffectual and embarrassing evening in the theatre.

A lot of words banned at family firesides are tossed around by the inmates in Helen Allistair's filthy boarding house. They drew raucous laughs from many of the first-nighters. Such epithets have been justifiably used by competent craftsmen. But in this instance, we feel they have been thrown in as sucker bait for indiscriminating playgoers.

Joseph Kipness and Jack Hylton have brought over an all-English cast to act "Women of Twilight." And there isn't a man in it. Judging by their biographies in the program, there are several excellent players among them—players who have given superior performances to better vehicles.

It is difficult for a reviewer to assess their work too harshly, for Anthony Hawtrey's tasteless and insensitive direction betrays them most of the time. However, Gwendoline Watford seemed to have an excellent emotional quality. She played with restraint and communicative feeling. We should like to see her again under happier circumstances.

Miriam Karlin, as a brassy dame of easy virtue, was singled out by the premierites for especial applause. And there were plenty of palm pats for Lorraine Clewes' impersonation of Gracie Fields without her music. Other valiants in the company are Mary Merrall, June Whitfield, Gwynne Whitby, Betty Ann Davies, Mary Matthews, Lynda Lee, Joan Forrest and Marjory Hawtrey.

Miss Hawtrey was quite good as a doughty, chin-up, determined nurse.

Mary Purvis has designed a drably realistic setting that should win a prize as the most depressing of the season.

As the curtain fell, one of the twilight women piped cheerfully, "All right," and before another could pipe back, "All right," we mumbled "All wrong," and dashed for the nearest exit.

New York Post

March 4, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Unmarried Mothers of England

"Women of Twilight," the English importation that opened at the Plymouth Theater last night, isn't a bore, which is something, but I can certainly think of no other compliment to pay it. The story of a hapless group of unmarried mothers, preyed upon by the vicious proprietor of a sordid rooming-house, it is overwrought, clumsy, maudlin, mawkish, silly and generally unbelievable. There is no reason to doubt its author's sincerity, but, despite her earnestness, the play bears the fatal imprint of an old-fashioned B-movie melodrama.

There was a picket line of the scenic designers' union thrown around the theater, but, without going into the matter of the dispute over the local use of the setting designed for the London production, it can be said that it was the events taking place on the Plymouth stage, and not the activities on the sidewalk outside, which provided the unconquerable handicap of "Women of Twilight." It is just an additional evidence of the frequently varying tastes of British and American audiences that the play is apparently a current English success.

Matter of Sincerity

The curious thing about the London melodrama, which is the work of a former waitress named Sylvia Rayman, is that the dramatist clearly wrote her play out of personal observation, with deep feeling, and in the grimmest, most earnest conviction. And yet the people, the background and the narrative of "Women of Twilight," which were obviously so real, so tragic and so important to her, emerge in the theater as the most incredible sort of greasepaint trash. She is quite possibly recording an actual history, but, somehow, you can believe none of it.

As hopelessly clumsy and foolish as her unhappy play is, it doesn't necessarily prove that an author's sincerity of purpose is completely wasted. It is hard to think of a recent theatrical exhibit that has contained so many wildly improbable incidents, and yet, despite all its running of the gamut of melodramatic nonsense, the audience never quite got out of hand or laughed in the wrong places. Since there were many chances for such laughter, and local first-nighters are not notoriously polite, this must be a tribute to Miss Rayman's sincerity.

Perhaps it might have been better for the slight survival possibilities of the play if it had been accepted as a burlesque. Possibly the tale of the young mother, who turns up at the hideous rooming-house run by the abominable Mrs. Allistair and encounters virtually everything from the sullen girl, whose sweetheart is being hanged, to the body of the idiot serving maid's baby that is buried under a tree in the garden, could be looked on as a serviceable melodramatic parody. But, because there are intermittent signs that the dramatist was writing from her heart, I'm glad that it wasn't.

The all-woman cast that was imported with the play contains a number of earnest actresses unknown to me, and it is not fair to judge them on the basis of the speeches and emotions with which they have to wrestle. I am inclinded to suspect that such players as Betty Ann Davies, Gwendoline Watford, Mary Matthews and Lynda Lee could be effective under happier circumstances, while Mary Merrall, as the evil proprietor, reveals occasional signs of power. Having a perverse taste for trash, I wasn't made drowsy by "Women of Twilight," but trash it is.

New York World-Telegram
and
The [illegible] Sun

March 4, 1952

Shadow Hangs Over 'Women of Twilight'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Women of Twilight" is said to be a substantial hit in London. If so, it must appeal to an audience for which our theater has few charms, as it seems unlikely that it will repeat its success on Broadway.

This is a farfetched and unconvincing melodrama about the housing shortage as it affects unwed mothers. If it was vulgar or shocking or suspenseful, it might have certain attractions even if it was not very good. But it is none of these.

Grim Landlady.

It has the obviousness and transparency of a comic strip, one-dimensional characters, an arbitrarily plotted narrative and is staged to laboriously milk theatrical effects from situations which are essentially static.

The play takes on the air of a "Grand Hotel" of a boarding house for girls who have gone wrong. The landlady is a villainess of incredible proportions. She starves the babies, thrashes and blackmails their mothers, murders both—and besides is bad tempered.

The story hinges on the fact that the girls, most of whom are pretty tough to begin with, are so cowed by her behavior that they are afraid to call in a doctor, much less the law.

The Downfallen.

The most elaborate inmate is a moll whose beau is hanged for murder. She ends up giving her baby for adoption to another girl who has a husband but has lost her own child to the landlady's penuriousness.

There are various elaborations on the character of the downfallen woman. One girl claims aristocratic standing because she has been raped. Another spies for the landlady, and another keeps on hustling.

That "Women of Twlight" is a stew of bad, cheap movies and True Confessions is further illustrated by the presence of an idiot housemaid.

A long line of pickets outside the theater objected last night to the imported scenery. If the audience had thought of it, it probably would have objected, too.

Imported Talent.

An all-female cast, also imported, fights this material with high spirits.

Mary Merrall plays the Charles Addams landlady with morose authority, and Lorraine Clewes has a sort of acrobatic, or music hall, method of getting laughs.

Miriam Karlin contributed most of the evening's gay moments with her nasal, Cockney readings as a flamboyant, forthright lingerie saleswomen.

Most of the acting is proficient, though none of it is really very much more inspired than the play, which is to sadly say that at its best it is eagerly pedestrian.

Journal-American

March 4, 1952

An Excellent Play, And Gruesome, Too

By JOHN McCLAIN

The general subject of unwed motherhood was given a thorough going-over at the Plymouth Theatre last night by an array of talented British actresses in a play called "Women of Twilight." One gathers, after three grueling acts, that it isn't a very good idea.

That is not to say, however, that the proceedings are without merit. The whole thing is extremely depressing, but it also is an adult and incisive psychological study which provides liberal scope for some of the most capable performances of the season.

I would rank Mary Merrall with the top lady monsters of this or any other year; I will defy anybody to uncover a more convincing brawler than Lorraine Clewes, or a closer approximation to Mae West than Miriam Karlin. I will even go so far as to say that Betty Ann Davies, is a fair successor to Jeanne Eagles.

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11 Crimes Pile Up

This is not the show for the depressed executive or the bridge-happy matron, and I certainly would not take Junior, but it is nevertheless eminently good theatre.

The structure is provided by a series of episodes that take place in the "home" of Miss Merrall near London. She has set up a refuge where unwed mothers can get board and lodging prior to and after the arrival of their unfortunate infants.

It become apparent, early in the first act, that her prices are exhorbitant, the living conditions not as advertised, the care of the babies deplorable and the food non-existent.

But whenever a crisis arises the landlady has an obvious out. There is no other place to go and, anyway, she knows too much about all the inmates.

As the play progresses, so does Miss Merrall's villainy. Her crimes have extended to baby bartering, to the direct and indirect deaths of several of the illegitimate infants and to no end of petty thievery through blackmail. But her aura of solid respectability remains intact, protecting her from the authorities and leveling the blame on one of her unhappy boarders.

Comes the day, of course, when Miss Davies gets her number. But not until everybody in the audience has been wrung tearless by the death of a baby, and incited to riot by a scene in which Miss Merrall walks coldly away from an expectant mother she has just flung violently across the stage on her stomach.

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I will tell you no more, beyond the fact that somewhere in all this despair there are some monstrously hilarious moments with Miss Karlin, the one person in the cast who regards the unfortunate acquisition of an offspring as a simple hazard of her profession; and a great fight between Miss Davies and Miss Clewes.

They really tear into each other, these two, dragging each other over the boards by the hair and making very realistic efforts to employ their finger nails to the best advantage.

All the subordinate actresses are excellent; in fact one has the feeling that they're only subordinate because of the limits of their parts.

I know nothing of Sylvia Rayman, the authoress, beyond the meagre billing in the program, but she can write a play. She may even one day write a truly great one.

This one is good. It's also good and gruesome.